

THE WORLD

American Survey



Westmoreland, Rusk, McNamara: what is the truth?

Voices from a different America

Washington, DC

All the time, in reading the summaries and excerpts of the Pentagon Papers (or "History of the United States Decision-making Process on Vietnam Policy," as they are officially called), one has to remind oneself that the world was different then, in the early 1960s, and that the men whose positions are recorded were speaking and acting for a different America. The idea that an object of policy might be desirable but still beyond their country's strength came only very slowly to them. "Perhaps the world has passed me by," reflected Mr Dean Rusk, who was Secretary of State to Presidents Kennedy and Johnson and is now a professor in Georgia, in a television interview on July 2nd. Preventing the third world war, protecting the reputation of the United States (ideas which, to Mr Rusk, are largely synonymous), were "unfashionable" ideas now, he reflected, when half the American people had no

memory of the second world war. Mr Rusk used his hour of television time to defend the integrity of his colleagues and his chief and to brood on the change that had occurred in the national mood. He admitted two substantial errors of judgment: "I personally, I think, underestimated the persistence and the tenacity of the North Vietnamese" and "I overestimated the ability of the American people to accept a protracted conflict."

The interest of the Pentagon Papers is not in telling us what happened; that, broadly speaking, we knew already. But suddenly, by courtesy of Dr Daniel Ellsberg, we are able to listen to the actors talking business to one another over a period of 20 years and it is a different experience from listening to their press conferences or their television chats. When an ambassador talks of "assuring the South Vietnamese the oppor-

tunity to determine their future without outside interference," we think we know what he means, but in the Pentagon Papers we have it in black and white: "the United States should commit itself to the clear objective of preventing the fall of South Vietnam to communism" (Mr Rusk and Mr McNamara, then, Secretary of Defence, to President Kennedy, November, 1961).

That Mr Dulles disliked the Geneva accords which were intended to put an end to the conflict in Indochina in July, 1954, and refused to join in the final declaration, is not news. But the official American position was one of dignified aloofness, coupled with a promise "to refrain from the threat or use of force to disturb" the accords. The Pentagon Papers put the attitude of the Eisenhower Administration, under the guidance of Mr Dulles, in sharper relief. The National Security Council took three weeks to decide that the Geneva accords were a disaster and then set out on an American policy of building a new South Vietnamese state round the person of Ngo Dinh Diem.

The accords had been categorical that Vietnam was not two states but one; the northern and southern halves were merely "the regrouping zones of the two parties" and everybody concerned—including the United States in its unilateral declaration—subscribed to the "unity" of the country. But American actions were dictated by the haste to stem "a major forward stride of communism which may lead to the loss of south-east Asia," as the decision of the National Security Council put it, and they paid no heed to the country's notional unity. The fact has more than momentary significance, since it led to the sincerely held belief of the Kennedy and Johnson Administrations in the 1960s that the trouble in Vietnam was a simple case of international aggression by one state against another.

It had become accepted, and remained accepted under successive

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